Ligonier Ministries is an international Christian discipleship organization founded by theologian Dr. R.C. Sproul in 1971. Our mission is to proclaim, teach, and defend the holiness of God in all its fullness to as many people as possible.

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THE WHOLE COUNSEL *of* GOD

COURAGEOUS CALVINISM
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

W. ROBERT GODFREY

This essay was originally delivered as Dr. Godfrey's inaugural address as president of Westminster Seminary California in 1993. It was revised to encourage the work of Ligonier Ministries in 2021.

The calling of Ligonier Ministries is to renew the churches through a growing knowledge of biblical Christianity, which is to say a knowledge of historic Calvinism. Ligonier is continuing the teaching ministry of R.C. Sproul, one of the best minds and one of the most balanced, faithful, and effective Reformed teachers of the last half-century. He inherited and continued a marvelous tradition: the militant stance for the fundamentals of the faith of J. Gresham Machen; the scholarship and Reformed orthodoxy of old Princeton Seminary; the evangelizing, Reformed revivalism of the First Great Awakening; the confessional and experiential Calvinism of the Westminster Confession of Faith; the teaching of John Calvin and the Reformation; and the legacy of Augustine and true catholicity. What a heritage is ours. How much we have inherited from those who have gone before. What a responsibility for us to preserve and advance what we have received.

We recognize that the great accomplishments of Christians in the past are now challenged in unique ways. After more than 1,500 years of Christianity's providing the dominant worldview in the West, we now find ourselves living in a post-Christian world. Certainly in terms of Calvinism, our numbers, our influence, and our fervor seem much diminished. I was reminded of this in an essay by John Updike. Thinking about those beautiful Congregational churches on village greens in New England, he wrote: "Joy and aspiration have shaped these churches, but a certain melancholy may fill them. Puritanism faded into Unitarianism and thence to stoic agnosticism; these gallant old shells hold more memories than promises."[1] Has our movement come to hold more memories than promises? That is the great issue, it seems to me, before us today. My passion and my concern are that we be committed to the notion that Calvinism holds more promises than memories, as rich and glorious as those memories are.

The title of this essay, "The Whole Counsel of God," comes from Acts 20:27, from the words of the Apostle Paul as he encouraged the Ephesian elders in their future service of the Lord. He said to them in part:

> You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:18–32)

Paul called on the Ephesian elders to preserve and build on the Christian truth that he had brought to them. He had given them "the whole counsel of God" and called on them to live courageously on the basis of that truth. Today we need a courageous Calvinism for the unique time in which we live. What is the character of that courageous Calvinism that we need? What is the truth of God that we must embrace, live, and teach?

COMPREHENSIVE CALVINISM

The first element of courageous Calvinism that we need is a comprehensive Calvinism. You notice how Paul talked about the "whole counsel of God" (v. 27), that he did not hold back from them "anything that was profitable" (v. 20). Paul spoke very much in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, who sent out His disciples in the Great Commission to go and teach "all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Scripture and our Calvinistic heritage are clear that we are committed to all that the Lord has revealed in His Word. We seek no shrunken religion. We seek no minimalist doctrine. We seek the fullness of what the Lord has revealed to us. We stand with Jeremiah as the Lord spoke to him: "Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word" (Jer. 26:2). The task that is committed to us is to speak the whole counsel of God, all that God has revealed. Ligonier exists to help Christians study that Word in its totality and grow in that Word.

Our growth is founded on and rooted in our commitment to the Word and its inerrant authority. We embrace the Word in the spirit

of John Calvin, who said, "A soul, therefore when deprived of the Word of God, is given up unarmed to the devil for destruction."[2] Our conviction is that the Word must be our sword and our defense. The Word in its complete truthfulness is what we need and that to which we are committed.

Calvin, commenting on Jeremiah 42:5–6, said:

> If we desire to prove our fidelity to God, the only way of acting is, to regard his Word as binding, whether it be agreeable or otherwise, and never to murmur, as the ungodly do; for when God would have a yoke laid on them, they complain that his doctrine is too hard and burdensome. Away, then, with all those things which can render God's Word unacceptable to us, if we desire to give sure proof of our fidelity.[3]

We accept the Word of God in its fullness. We are committed to it, both where it is pleasing to us and where it pinches us. Because of our sins and our ignorance, we must have the Word of God to correct us. And that means that we stand committed to a full biblical theology. J. Gresham Machen expressed this forcefully, reminding us that the "Christian life is the fruit of Christian doctrine, not its root, and Christian experience must be tested by the Bible, not the Bible by Christian experience."[4] We are committed to this notion that the Word judges us; we do not judge the Word. The Word directs us; we do not direct the Word.

R.C. Sproul continued and deepened this commitment with his leadership in defending the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible during his ministry. Inerrancy became a touchstone of true biblical fidelity, helping to reveal those who tried to use traditional terms for biblical authority and reliability but used those terms in equivocal ways.

Because of our commitment to the Word, we are committed to the notion of the importance of theology. We are committed to the idea that theology is a reflection on the Word and an effort on the part of human beings to summarize that Word. We are convinced that theology is a useful, necessary discipline for appropriating the Scriptures for us. Evelyn Waugh, the British novelist, gave one of the best definitions of theology I know after his journey to Ethiopia for the coronation of the emperor Haile Selassie. After observing the extreme mystery of the rituals of the Ethiopian Coptic Church, he rejoiced in a theology that makes clear what God's ways are. He wrote, "I saw theology as the science of the simplification by which nebulous and elusive ideas are formalized and made intelligible and exact."[5] The "science of simplification"—how seldom theology has been seen that way, but how true that is. Theology should make clear God's will and God's way as He has expressed them in His Word. And we here at Ligonier are committed to the full theology of the confessions to which we have subscribed, as they summarize biblical teaching for us.

Now, some have said that stressing the importance of theology makes Christianity too intellectualized. Some fear this means that only theologians have a role in the church. Perhaps in the tradition of our Reformed churches, there has been some danger of that. But it is not inherent in our tradition. We are not saying that theology is all there is to Christianity. But we are saying that theology must shape life. There must be life, but it must be shaped and directed by the Word of God.

Indeed, our Reformed heritage says that we do have more than theology. We also have piety; we have worship; we have loving service to the Lord. All these elements of Calvinism also flow out of the teachings of Scripture. We can see that clearly, for example, in the work of the Westminster Assembly. We need to remember that

the Westminster Assembly not only gave us a confession of faith as a summary of doctrine, but it also gave us catechisms to teach the faith. It gave us a directory of worship to guide our meeting with God. It gave us a form of government to help in the organization of the church. And it gave us a Psalter to voice our praise to God. As we seek a comprehensive Calvinism, we must be sure that we have not shrunk it just to theology—however full our theology might be. We must be renewed in the fullness of a Reformed life flowing out of a Reformed theology. Our lives must follow a pattern of Bible study and prayer, of Word and sacrament, of self-denial and active love, and of Sabbath and of Psalm. We have seen a great decline in Reformed piety, in Reformed life, and I would suggest that decline is tied intimately to our loss of Sabbath and of Psalm. Too many of us have lost a day of rest, worship, study, and reflection and have lost the Psalms that put steel in our souls. We need to recapture that fullness of Calvinistic experience as well as Calvinistic theology.

We need the courage to be comprehensive in our Calvinism. We need to avoid the danger of minimalism and shallowness that pervades Christianity today. As David Wells so powerfully put it in his book *No Place For Truth*: "We laugh at those who think theology is important, and then are shocked to find in our midst the superficial and unbelieving."[6] We need a comprehensive Calvinism, and that takes courage in our time.

CONSISTENT CALVINISM

Second, we need a consistent Calvinism. We need Calvinism that grows out of its own inherent genius, a Calvinism that shows a coherence in its life, ministry, and message. We need Calvinism, therefore, that at every point and in every way seeks to ask how we build organically on the insights into Scripture that our forebears have given us. As Calvinists, we want to avoid a kind of eclecticism that

goes through the religious world gathering tidbits here and there and in an artificial way tries to connect them to the Reformed heritage that we have inherited. We want to be consistent in our Calvinism. We want every aspect of our lives, our piety, and our worship to flow out of those Reformed convictions that we confess in our theology.

That consistency will not always be easy to achieve. The consistent answer will not always be obvious. But that should be our goal; that should be our determination—to allow the Scripture to guide us in all areas of life. It should guide our education of future leaders; it should guide our evangelism; it should guide our church planting; it should guide our worship. John Calvin said of worship, "There is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God."[7] God calls upon us in every area of our lives to ask how we can live consistently for Him. We do not want an accommodating or eclectic Calvinism. We want a consistent Calvinism.

From our commitment to consistent Calvinism comes our commitment to systematic theology. Our concern for systematic theology, as R.C. Sproul showed us so clearly, is not a concern to be ruled by logic but a concern to see the cohesion and interconnectedness of biblical teaching. For example, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had preached to everyone "of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). But what is the relationship between faith and repentance? That is a question of connections, of systematic theology. Some might think such a question is not important, but Calvin rightly said that it is an extremely important question for understanding the essence of the gospel. Calvin wrote: "The sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins." Repentance, which is "newness of life," Calvin insisted, is "born of faith," or justification by faith alone will be destroyed.[8] Systematic relations are vital to truth and life.

Now, in calling for a consistent Calvinism, we are not saying that there is nothing to learn from others. We need to resist our all-too-present Reformed tendencies to be smug and self-satisfied. We need to listen to brothers and sisters of other traditions. We need to weigh what they would say to us. We need to clearly recognize the reality of genuine Christianity in other traditions that can speak to us and can help us. But if we are committed to historic confessional Calvinism as the fullest and most faithful form of biblical teaching, then we must evaluate what we are hearing from other traditions by that root of faith from which we seek to grow and to be sure that we are being consistent Calvinists. We need courage, then, to be consistent Calvinists.

CHRISTOCENTRIC CALVINISM

Third, I would say that we need to be Christocentric Calvinists. Now there will be some, no doubt, who will think that this should have been my first point and not my third. Such a contention could well be argued, although I would say that in my notion of a comprehensive theology, Christ will be central. But I think a Christocentric Calvinism must be underscored because in all things Jesus Christ must be preeminent for the Christian. As Paul proclaimed in Ephesus the whole counsel of God, so he also especially taught "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21) and "the gospel of the grace of God" (v. 24). In that comprehensive and consistent Calvinism to which we aspire, we must always remember that Christ must be at the center: Christ's atoning work on the cross; Christ's glorious victory over sin and death in His resurrection; Christ our great Prophet, Priest, and King; Christ our Lord through the Holy Spirit. Christ is at the very heart and center of our lives, our piety, our faith, our study, and our preaching. And so, we must always and again renew ourselves in that central commitment to Jesus Christ.

When we make Christ central, it will help us in the other decisions we have to make about a consistent Calvinism. When Christ is at the center, priorities become much clearer. We can distinguish more important and less important doctrines from one another. We can distinguish doctrines more certain and less certain. We see that in the priority R.C. Sproul placed on articulating and defending the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This doctrine shows powerfully the centrality and completeness of Christ as our Savior. We look away from ourselves and all our doing to find our rest and hope in Jesus alone.

Christocentrism will also help us be humble in the broader community of Christian churches as we seek to learn from one another and to live together in love, cooperating wherever possible with fellow Christians. Our goal must be Christocentric Calvinism that gives us an intense sense of spiritual union with all those who are truly in Christ by faith. Christocentric Calvinism will help us avoid the danger of a Reformed sectarianism that would say we alone are Christians, that we alone have the truth. We need the courage, then, to be Christocentric in our Calvinism.

COMMITTED CALVINISM

Fourth, I would say that we need a committed Calvinism. You notice how Paul in Acts 20 talked about not holding his own life dear but doing all that he could to finish his course (v. 24) and how he came to them in all lowliness of mind and with tears, to communicate the grace of God (v. 19). Paul was showing in all these statements how he had lived a committed life among his people.

Perhaps of all the dangers we face, the greatest is failing to be committed Calvinists. The commitment we need is well expressed in

a statement of one of the founding documents of Princeton Theological Seminary, which pledged "to develop in those who shall aspire to the ministerial office, both that piety of heart which is the fruit of the renewing and sanctifying grace of God, and solid learning, believing that zeal without knowledge or knowledge without zeal must ultimately prove injurious to the Church."[9] Many traditions have a lot of zeal and not much learning. But our besetting danger today is that we have great learning and not much zeal. Our great danger is that we have become comfortable Calvinists, that life has become easy for us and we are contented with that ease. Long gone are the days when someone like King Charles II could observe, "Presbyterianism is no religion for gentlemen."[10] Those Scottish Presbyterians of whom King Charles spoke were anything but gentlemen. They did not compromise for king or noblemen. They were committed in the spirit of John Knox, of whom the regent Morton said at his grave, "Here lies one who never feared any flesh."[11]

Do we still exhibit an appropriate lack of gentlemanliness, or have we fit all too well into the world in which we live? I was reading in the *New York Review of Books* an article on religion in which Elizabeth Hardwick wrote, "The Calvinists, in natural waning of the impractical notions of Election and Predestination, are today a mild and reasonable denomination, recessive in the manner of other traditional Protestant churches."[12] Has it really come to that? Are we just mild and recessive? I am afraid it may have come to that. It may have come to what William Butler Yeats wrote in his famous poem "The Second Coming": "The best lack of all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Where is our passionate intensity, assuming for the moment that we are closer to being the best than the worst? Where is our zeal? Where is our commitment? Where is our conviction that the comprehensive, consistent, Christocentric Calvinism that we teach is in fact

what the Word of God teaches and what the world needs? Where is our passion? It has not died out altogether. We have examples in the twentieth century to inspire us. We have the zealous Calvinism of the Tiv people in Nigeria, where there are more people in church every Sunday, by far, than there are members of the church because they so carefully guard membership in the church. When I think of commitment, I also think of the great Scottish Presbyterian missionary Mary Slessor, who went to Nigeria in the late nineteenth century. As a woman alone, she journeyed into the jungle because the men were afraid to go, and she went to the most dangerous of tribes to bring them the gospel of Christ. She said, "I am ready to go anywhere, provided it be forward."[13]

Do we have that commitment; do we have that zeal; do we have that passion? We need it in the church and in its ministers. It must be fueled by the Word of God and by continuing education in the truth. Almost a century ago, J. Gresham Machen wrote in *Christianity and Liberalism,* "Christian education is the chief business of the hour for every earnest Christian man."[14] We need Christian education. Machen said it starts in the family. It goes on through the schools, and it culminates in the seminary so that ministers can teach the people of God the truths of God. R.C. Sproul continued that passion for education in his many writings and in establishing Reformation Bible College. We want education so that Christians will know Scripture, will embrace the historic theological heritage of Christianity, and will be committed to teaching those things in this world.

Today we must all embrace the ideal of being missionaries. We must be missionaries who may be working in a culture that may not fully understand us, but with the commitment of missionaries who are willing to leave even family and home to teach the Word of God. We must be missionaries in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, who,

as we read in John 6, sought to make true disciples. He started with five thousand and finished with twelve (one of whom was to be a traitor), not because He preferred few to many but because He wanted true disciples rather than false disciples. We, too, must seek to make true, faithful disciples.

So, if we are to be committed Calvinists, we need to be committed to our heritage and we need to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (Heb. 10:23). We need to heed the Word of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "Dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them" (Jer. 1:17). It is not the world that we need to fear; it is the Lord, if we are faithless.

We must learn to pray for that commitment. We need fervent prayer as a foundation to our commitment. Again, Jeremiah recorded: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart" (29:11–13). Are we wholehearted Calvinists? Do we single-mindedly seek the Lord and His will and His blessing and His service?

CONFIDENT CALVINISM

Fifth, we know that promoting courageous Calvinism is a huge undertaking, one that may at times seem overwhelming. But I thought of the words of Robert Frost in his poem "Reluctance." In the last stanza, he writes,

> Ah, when to the heart of man
> Was it ever less than a treason
> To go with the drift of things,

> To yield with a grace to reason,
> And bow and accept the end
> Of a love and a season?[15]

We must not be traitors to our cause, accepting the end of a love and a season. Rather, we must go on, faithful to the Lord, trusting in Him, in His good timing, in His good purposes. God is sovereign, and we must be confident in His work and purposes.

Historically, some Calvinists have been dour and grim in their lives and piety. But R.C. Sproul was a great model of a joyful Calvinism because he was so confident in God's work in Jesus in God's world. He was completely confident in the reliability of God's Word. He knew that our focus should be not on our failures but on God's success.

In 1898, Abraham Kuyper came to America to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton University. The last lecture was titled "The Future of Calvinism." Kuyper did not speak as a prophet, but he spoke to encourage God's people to think about the future. He thought the future of Christianity was in Asia. (He was not such a bad prophet, perhaps!) But he said at the end of that lecture on Calvinism and the future:

> And if you retort, half mockingly, am I really naïve enough to expect from certain Calvinistic studies a reversal in the Christian world view, then be the following my answer: The quickening of life does not come from men: it is the prerogative of God, and it is due to His sovereign will alone, whether or not the tide of religious life rise high in one century and run to a low ebb in the next. . . . Unless God send forth His Spirit, there will be no turn, and fearfully rapid will be the descent of the waters. But do you remember the Aeolian Harp, which

> men were wont to place outside their encasement, that the breeze might wake its music into life. Until the wind blew, the harp remained silent, while, again even though the wind arose, if the harp did not lie in readiness, a rustling of the breeze might be heard, but not a single note of ethereal music delighted the ear. Now, let Calvinism be nothing but such in an Aeolian Harp—absolutely powerless, as it is, without the quickening Spirit of God—still we feel it our God-given duty to keep our harp, its strings tuned aright, ready in the window of God's Holy Zion, awaiting the breath of the Spirit.[16]

Our responsibility is not to produce great success in our strength. Our responsibility is to be faithful and thereby to be instruments that God may use just as He will. Our great concern should not be our success or our will, but it should be God's will and God's success. And as Calvinists, our confidence will be that God will accomplish His purpose. He will not be thwarted. And we can go forward in the marvelous words of Jonathan as he went out almost single-handed against the army of Philistines: "It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6). Perhaps the Lord will act for us, but we know that the Lord will save according to His good purpose whether by many or by few. May we in our work for Ligonier embrace the whole counsel of God and, in embracing it, become courageous Calvinists for the twenty-first century. May God bless us by His Spirit to that great end as we seek Him with all our hearts.

NOTES

1 John Updike, "New England Churches," in *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Random House, 2013), 61.

2 John Calvin, "Calvin's Reply to Sadoleto," in *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 78.

3 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentation*, vol. 4, *Jeremiah 30–47* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), 484.

4 Westminster Theological Seminary Catalog 1929–30, 17.

5 Evelyn Waugh, *Remote People: A Report from Ethiopia and British Africa 1930–31* (New York: Ecco, 1990), 68.

6 David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 247.

7 "Calvin's Reply to Sadoleto," 59.

8 See Calvin's development of this important point in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.3.1.

9 This statement was adapted by Westminster Theological Seminary from Princeton's founding documents. Cf. *Plan of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, located in Princeton, New Jersey,* 2nd ed. (Elizabeth-town, 1816), 4–5.

10 Cited in Elizabeth Hardwick, "Church Going," *New York Review of Books* (August 18, 1988): 15. The statement of King Charles II was originally recorded in Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time* (London, 1724), vol. 1, book 2, 107.

11 W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God* (New York, 1974), 283.

12 Hardwick, 15.

13 W.P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary* (Westwood, N.J.: Barbour, 1986), 56.

14 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1946), 177.

15 "Reluctance," in *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, 1964), 43.

16 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1931), 199.